

Do We Embody Devotion to the God of Jesus?

Do we embody our devotion to the God of Jesus. God is the loving energy that empowers companionship, which builds community. We can keep growing and thriving in healthy ways by leaning into companioning love.

We hope that loving companionship is the purpose of our ministry as People's Congregational Church. And we hope that our wider community felt that during Harvest Fest yesterday – abundance of companioning love. Let us pray:

Spirit of God (which is Love), you have gathered us today in our beloved church building, built and loved by our ancestors in faith on land that has been in relationship with the Wahpekute Dakota and many peoples for millennia before us. As you knit us together in an even deeper way today, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

We have arrived, friends, to a peak weekend in the cycle of our People's Congregational Church year, what with Harvest Fest yesterday an abundance of joy and now Stewardship Sunday when we consecrate, dedicate to the work of love some portion of our financial assets. It is a big Sunday for us.

It is also, in the circle of the wider church year, often called Christ the King Sunday (or, in some traditions, the Reign of Christ Sunday), which occurs right before we move into the season of Advent when we wonder: how will the Love of God break into our lives in new ways now? The language of Reign of Christ Sunday or Christ the King Sunday can be fraught because it brings up words like Lord and other patriarchal sounding words about power over. And yet it is interesting to wonder about the "reign of Christ" and those words "the kin-dom of God" that we pray for in the Prayer of Jesus, because Lord means to be sovereign and sovereign means to be supreme or ultimate or unlimited in our lives.

So we welcome the reign of Christ (that is, love embodied through Jesus) to be sovereign in all that we do – in all of our efforts to love.

The birth narrative of John in the gospel of Luke today comes before the birth narrative of Jesus. They were known to be kin – cousins. This reading for today is not typically in our three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary. However, it was offered today as an alternative reading in the lectionary and it was a very important narrative in my childhood.

I had a couple of questions come to mind this week and I thought about this story. I wondered: would the neighbors have shared in her suffering as much as they shared in Elizabeth's joy? Would the neighbors also have shared in her suffering if she had been suffering. And I also wondered, why did the community have strong "intentions" (or assumptions, anyway) for naming the baby?

I'd like to read again a portion of that reading: *"When the time came for Elizabeth to deliver, she gave birth to a son. When her neighbors and relatives heard that God had been merciful to her, they shared her joy. When all had assembled for the circumcision on the eighth day, they intended to name the baby after his father Zechariah. But his mother spoke up, 'No, he is to be called John.' They pointed out to her, 'But no one in your family has this name.' Then they made signs to the father to find out what he wanted the child to be named. The father asked for a writing tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' They were all astonished."*

Now, I did find answers – some important culturally based answers to why the people (the friends and neighbors) had intentions for the child's name. Well, in the Jewish tradition (still today), it can be very important to gather for a naming ceremony and to be part of that. And, often at the eighth day (around the time of a circumcision) for a male child or in the first couple of weeks for a female child, there is Hebrew name given that may align with the first letter of the child's name in the language spoken in the family's home or maybe an ancestral name or even the name of a person still living in the family.

So naming ceremonies are very important and the close community does gather with the family. And we have witnessed in the last year or two a couple of baptisms in our church. That is a ritual we have when the community gathers and hears the name (the identity) of that child, beloved by all. So I did find that answer to why they were so eager, so intent on being part of this moment of naming the child.

Craig Rennebohm has authored a book entitled, *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God: Stories of the Search for Home and Healing on the Streets*. The book jacket describes his work this way: *“Rennebohm is a United Church of Christ minister who worked for over twenty years on the streets of Seattle, WA, supporting homeless individuals struggling with mental illness on the journey through the community mental health system to stability in the community. He has worked extensively with families, served as chaplain on inpatient mental health units and has worked in partnership with local congregations to develop mental health ministries that include education, spiritual care and support groups, services of healing and encouragement, shelter, drop-in programs and supported housing.”*

So with that context about this author, Craig Rennebohm, I share this brief quote from him about companionship. *“Companionship begins as we offer hospitality. It begins as we stand or sit with each other side by side and look out together upon the world in solidarity.”*

I had asked, would the neighbors have shared in her suffering as they shared in this occasion in Elizabeth’s joy. It’s interesting. I think we’ve all heard the term “fair-weather friends,” where sometimes someone who knows us is ready and eager to celebrate with us in the joyful times. But I actually have someone close in my family who has referred to the fact that they can be disappointed by their “foul-weather friends” – the ones who only show up when they are suffering and then aren’t really part of their everyday ordinary and aren’t really part of their joyful moments.

So, I wonder if we can push ourselves with our kin and closest friends to be not just fair-weather friends, not just foul-weather friends, but what? Perhaps companions, who are available to the breadth of life.

Again, Rennebohm said, *“Companionship begins as we offer hospitality. It begins as we stand or sit with each other side by side and look out together upon the world in solidarity.”*

I also had a question about the reading from Acts. And this was my question: Didn't they LONG for solitude? And do you ever long for more solitude than you find accessible for you?

Criss Jami, a young modern day philosopher, has written this about companionship: *“Companionship is a foreign concept to some people. They fear it as much as the majority of people fear loneliness.”*

Again, what does companionship consist of and how can it be life-giving to us, holding space for the fact that we also need solitude for many reasons. We heard in the reading from Acts:

“Those who believed lived together, shared all things in common; they would sell their property and goods, sharing the proceeds with one another as each had need. They met in the Temple and they broke bread together in their homes every day. With joyful and sincere hearts they took their meals in common, praising God and winning the approval of all the people. Day by day, God added to their number those who were being saved.”

It doesn't sound like there was much solitude going on there, but there was deep community. The people who gathered in small groups as these early churches were attempting to put into practice all that Jesus had been talking about during their lifetimes or their aunt and uncle's lifetimes. They wanted to find encouragement among each other to practice this way of Jesus.

Again, Jami stated, *“Companionship is a foreign concept to some people. They fear it as much as the majority of people fear loneliness.”*

We can wonder what our barriers might be sometimes to entering into deeper and deeper companionship, which needs to begin with our relationship of compassion with ourself and being ok in our own company, and then to the close people around us, and in wider and wider circles (including this lovely circle of our congregation).

I have had the distinct joy to meet a singer songwriter named Sara Thomsen. She has led the worship portion of retreats I've been involved in – one this fall with other clergy and ministry leaders and in other years. Sara is radically open to my Christian faith and all religions and spiritual traditions. Christianity doesn't happen to be hers. As you listen to these excerpted lyrics, I invite you to wonder how we are (and I believe we are) embodying companioning love in this congregation. My boys and I listen to this one on repeat in my car, so I can kind of hear the clapping rhythm this this song. These are powerful words from Sara:

*“Tell me where, where did Jesus go?
That brown skinned man walkin’ the road to Jericho...
He’s up and been deported to Mexico, allelu*

*Allelu! What you gonna do?
Allelu! I’m gonna stand by you
Love is all you got, love is all you do
It’s bigger than me, and it’s bigger than you, allelu*

*Tell me where, where is Jesus now?
That Middle Eastern man who could feed a hungry crowd...
He’s on a list of terrorists and they tossed him out of town, allelu*

*Tell me where, oh if you know, do tell
That wise guy wasting time with the woman at the well...
They say he’s queer and outta here and going straight to hell, allelu”
[“I’ll be there, too,” Sara sings. “I’ll be there with you,” chimes in her partner]*

It's this final verse that inspires me in our shared ministry:

***“Tell me where oh where, I search and I search
For that storytellin’ man, I can’t find him in the church
He walked out the door, took of his sandals
And shook off all the dirt, allelu”***

And her challenge to us is, again, the chorus:

*“Allelu! What you gonna do?
Allelu! I’m gonna stand by you
Love is all you got, love is all you do
It’s bigger than me, and it’s bigger than you, allelu”*

Let’s continue to strive to be a church where companions, old and new, do find that beautiful storytellin’ man – in the church! Let’s be part of how salvation (to draw on those last verses of our reading) will grow, how more people will come to be saved (that is, affirmed in the life and love that each of us embodies) through the work and activity of us as a congregation.

God is the loving energy that empowers companionship, which builds community. We can keep growing and thriving in healthy ways by leaning into companioning love. So let’s embody our devotion to this God of Jesus by making companioning love be our dominant way of being and therefore making it sovereign and reigning on Earth. Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People’s Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
November 20, 2022 (Stewardship Sunday, 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Luke 1: 57-79, Acts 2: 42-47